

CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

Making Excellence

ADDRESSING THE COLLEGE PRESIDENTS who had gathered, ninety years ago in Chicago, to form what was then called the Association of American Colleges (AAC), William Fraser McDowell introduced what would prove to be an enduring theme in the life and ethos of this community: “Your men and women who are teaching are not fundamentally teachers of subjects; they are fundamentally teachers of persons. And the great passion of the teacher should not be the passion of the language he teaches or the literature that he teaches, but the passion of the life that he is shaping, with language and with literature” (1915, 20).

I begin with this text because it is so clear to me that the great strength of this association, the focus that both brought us together and that still sustains our energy and commitment, is the investment we make in the lives of our students. Our commitment as an organization is to the passion and the possibilities of their lives,

their hopes, and their dreams. Our mission is to make the “aims of liberal learning a vigorous and constant influence on institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education.” But this mission reflects our knowledge that liberal education is the best and most transformative resource for the lives students seek to lead, as human beings, as citizens, and as participants in a dramatically changing world.

The ninetieth anniversary of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) offers an opportunity for reflection. Where are we now in our shared commitment to the values and practices of liberal education, and where do we need to go, within the academy as a whole and within AAC&U itself?

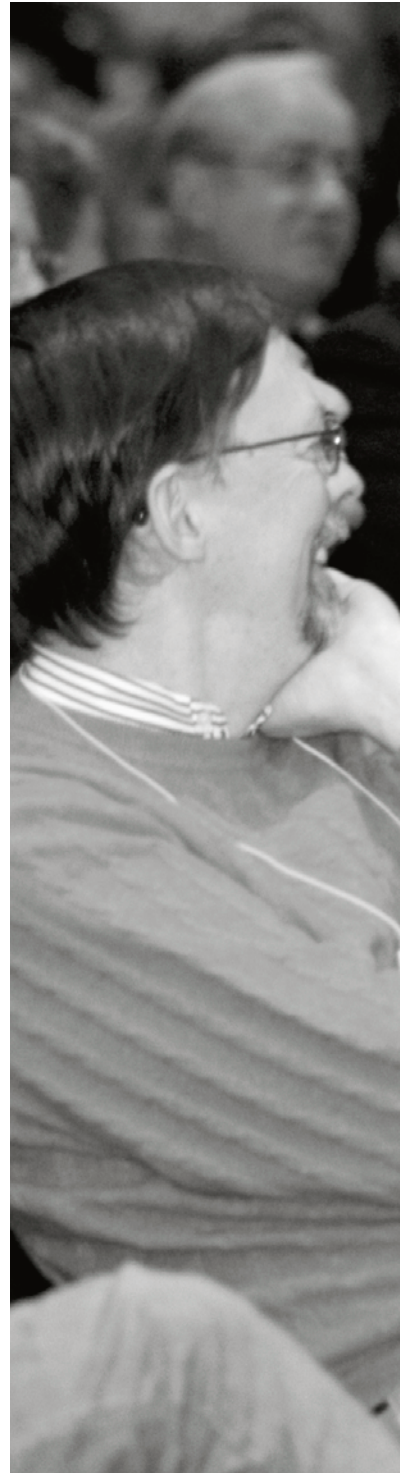
I am a historian at heart, and it is tempting to seize this anniversary moment to dwell on the rich history of this association, from its founding to its current focus on inclusive excellence. However, I will resist that temptation and restrict myself instead to just one pivotal marker: the decision our predecessors made in 1976, almost thirty years ago, to comprehensively reinvent this association’s focus and purpose.

Liberal education

AAC&U has always been committed to liberal education. In articulating the overarching aims of liberal education, our members also have worked constantly and conscientiously to ensure that liberal

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Inclusive

**Liberal Education &
America's Promise**



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education both engages and responds to larger changes in the world around us. Liberal education is not a static tradition of learning. Rather, it is and always has been a form of education that is richly and generatively engaged with the life and needs of the larger society. The power and continuing appeal of liberal education come from the combination of enduring values with creatively adaptive forms and practices. While AAC&U can take great pride in the constancy of our commitment to excellence in education, it is also important that we acknowledge the limitations both of our founding vision and of our earlier history. For it is also true that, during the first sixty years of AAC history, this association had a decidedly restrictive—that is to say,

membership associations, AAC was, assuredly, a bigger tent than many. Because we admitted colleges of arts and sciences within larger universities, the association has always included public members, even though private colleges were for many years the predominant constituency.

Nonetheless, the truth is that our institutional and intellectual conceptions of liberal education left out large segments of the higher education community and large segments of human endeavor. Moreover, as the twentieth century progressed, students' actual experience of liberal or liberal arts education was crowded into an ever smaller part of the curriculum on many campuses. By mid-century, many institutions identified liberal education primarily



Carol Geary Schneider,
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non-inclusive—institutional and intellectual understanding of where and through what kinds of study liberal education occurs.

From 1915 through 1976, our bylaws limited membership in this association exclusively to liberal arts colleges or to colleges of arts and sciences in larger universities, public and private. Thus, AAC served not the academy as a whole but, rather, the colleges of arts and sciences within the academy. Within that institutional context, it worked to advance the standing and influence of disciplines in the arts and sciences. Liberal education, in other words, was taken to be coterminous with study in specific disciplines and in specific institutional contexts.

By comparison with most other institutional

with their general education requirements, while a growing percentage of students—60 percent by the end of the century—chose pre-professional majors that were considered beyond the terrain of the liberal arts tradition. As a result, liberal education began to seem optional rather than essential, or, in the form of general education requirements, as a set of barriers students sought to “get out of the way” as early in college as possible.

In 1976, we began to face up to these challenges. In what was perceived at the time as a decidedly risky change of course, AAC ended its exclusive identification with colleges of arts and sciences and spun off (to a newly formed National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities) its role as the

recognized lobbying unit for private colleges and universities. We opened our membership to all of the nation's colleges and universities, large and small, public and private, two-year and four-year. And most importantly, we expanded our conception of liberal learning to address the subjects of the professional and technical schools through which ever-larger numbers of students were seeking college diplomas.

Toward an inclusive academy

And so, nearly thirty years ago, we began the work of repositioning this association as a voice and a force within the entire educational community for a new engagement with the overarching aims of college education. In making this change, this association's board and members embraced a lofty ideal and aspiration. The association's future goal, the board of directors asserted, would be to help liberal education "serve our entire nation as an instrument for shaping a future consistent with its highest ideals" (1976, 289). Pointedly, the board singled out AAC's then-current initiative on Change in Liberal Education as representative of the work that now needed to be undertaken.

AAC&U's current work on such far-reaching themes as Achieving Greater Expectations for All Students, Educating All Students for a World Lived in Common, and Making Excellence Inclusive shows how fully we have embraced this historic charge. But my larger point is that this expansion of focus responded to an extraordinarily fortuitous moment in the history of higher education. For in that same era, the 1970s, higher education was opening its doors wider than ever before. The academy had begun to admit—indeed, to seek out—whole new groups of students: adult students, students of color, first-generation students, international immigrant students, students from less advantaged families, students who were working full-time and attending part-time. Today, what were then called "nontraditional students" are, collectively, the new majority in higher education. It is perhaps more useful to recognize them as our nation's recently included students. They may have been new to

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higher education, but as we embarked in that expanded and more inclusive direction in 1976, they were of central interest to AAC&U. The pages of *Liberal Education* have been crowded ever since with issues both raised and illuminated by this far-reaching and democratic transformation of the college student community.

And so, starting in the 1970s, this association became a gathering place for everyone who believed that these recently included students needed and deserved the very best education we could provide—and for everyone who recognized that we would need to reexamine both the aims and the practices of liberal education if we wanted to meet that very high standard. We were guided by our commitment to liberal or liberating education. But we were also embarked on a search for new ways to make that kind of education available to an extraordinarily diverse generation of students.

This quest accounts for my own personal history with AAC&U. I was drawn to the association in the 1980s in the context of my own quest, as a young academic, for new practices to make liberal education a reality both for returning adult students and also for the many students—of all ages—who arrive on college campuses significantly unprepared for what liberal education would both offer and expect of them. But the creation of a new set of principles and practices for liberal education isn't just my story; it's the story of a generation. It is your story. Throughout the academy, tens of thousands of faculty and staff, and increasing numbers of quite disparate institutions, all experimented with new approaches to teaching and learning. Collectively, we set off not just one movement for reform in undergraduate education, but literally dozens of them.

Ultimately, virtually all of these reform agendas were driven by an effort to fulfill the promise of an empowering education for all our recently included students. We wanted to enlarge their horizons, develop their talents, teach them the skills they needed, prepare them more powerfully for that wider world of challenge and change. Today, as a result of your collective efforts, higher education is teeming with innovations: new academic

fields, new programs, a new emphasis on interdisciplinarity, new pedagogies, new outreach to the wider community.

The New Academy vision for liberal education

The point I want to emphasize is that, collectively, all these efforts are resulting not only in more effective strategies for teaching and learning but also in a far-reaching reinvigoration of liberal education. This is one of the core messages of both our recent report on greater expectations for student learning and the ninetieth anniversary annual meeting. Drawing from the insights and work of philosopher Elizabeth Minnich, this association has begun to speak of these far-reaching innovations as framing a “New Academy” that is growing up



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around and within the contours of the established academy. Collectively, the innovations that form this New Academy have begun to create both a new ethos for liberal education and new forms of teaching, learning, and scholarship that, by design, are both more intentional and more powerful in the way they educate today's new majority students—those who wouldn't have been on our campuses at all in the early years of this association. And, the evidence suggests, these New Academy curricula and pedagogies are equally powerful for our traditional students as well.

Frequently, we don't describe all these reform initiatives and innovations as liberal education. We tend to talk instead about specific curricular and pedagogical changes: first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, diversity courses, global studies, writing in the disciplines, capstone experiences, and the like. Or we may think of ourselves as working to advance new fields of scholarship or to advance interdisciplinary programs and teaching. Or, on many campuses, we describe our efforts as curriculum review or as new directions for general education. But if we stand back and look at the big picture, rather than at the individual components, we can see this new vision for liberal education coming into focus.

The new vitality in liberal education

The historian Bruce Kimball (1995) contends that there are two enduring commitments or traditions that have shaped the theory and practice of liberal education literally over the millennia. The first tradition, which Kimball terms “philosophical,” is concerned with the cultivation of reason, in all its forms and powers. In earlier eras, it focused on logic and the search for enduring truths; in the twentieth century, it was reconstituted as the methods and forms of the newly professionalized academic disciplines.

The second tradition encompasses study and practices that prepare students for their role in society and, especially, for leadership and service to society. Kimball calls this the oratorical tradition because rhetoric or the arts of persuasion have long been seen as essential to the education of leaders. I find it more illuminating, however, to think of this as the civic education tradition. Originally, this tradition was restricted to elites; increasingly, liberal education leaders in the United States and abroad recognize its profound importance to a democratic citizenry.

When I look at the sum total of the rapidly spreading innovations—in curriculum, co-curriculum, and pedagogy—what stands out for me is that each of these enduring themes in liberal education—the concern with intellectual powers and the concern with civic engagement and leadership—is taking on new life and new form in the contemporary academy.

I have tried to illuminate the connections between these most venerable aims of liberal

education and the myriad reform initiatives now flourishing across the academy (see Table 1). The first group of New Academy reforms represents a new intentionality about helping students develop empowering intellectual skills and about applying those skills to challenging problems. Together, we are finding more powerful ways to teach students how to make sense of complexity; how to find, evaluate, and use new evidence; and how to apply their knowledge to real problems.

While traditionally we have thought of these analytical and inquiry capacities as “intellectual powers,” the reality is that, in today’s knowledge-fueled society, they are deeply practical skills as well.

The second group of New Academy reforms includes innovations that are remapping the way we prepare students for responsible citizenship. In the nineteenth century, the college addressed its responsibilities in this matter by emphasizing religious instruction,

Table 1

A Guide to New Academy Reforms

1. Cultivating Intellectual and Inquiry Skills “Across the Curriculum”

Student Learning Outcomes

goals for learning articulated across the entire curriculum, guiding liberal arts and sciences disciplines and professional studies alike

First-Year Experiences and Seminars

programs and seminars that help students learn what is expected of them educationally and work proactively to develop better analytical, research, communication, and problem-solving skills

Intellectual Skills

Across the Curriculum

designs for practicing important skills recurrently “across the curriculum” in courses explicitly tagged for their emphasis on intensive writing, technology, quantitative reasoning, second language, and, sometimes, ethical reasoning

Undergraduate Research

involving students in inquiry-based learning; teaching skills required for research; engaging students in independent and faculty-led research

Capstone Expectations and Projects

demonstrate intellectual and practical learning, and also can provide evidence of social responsibility and integrative learning (60 percent of college students currently complete capstone work)

2. Fostering Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement

Big Questions

imaginative ways of teaching the arts and sciences that connect the content of these courses to important questions in the larger world

Field-Based Learning

a new emphasis on internships, service learning and other forms of practice that help students connect their academic learning with “real-world” experience

Diversity, Global Learning, and Civic Engagement

a wealth of programs, both curricular and cocurricular, intended to foster civic engagement, diversity and global learning, and social responsibility

Community-Based Research

a growing emphasis on community-based research, often done collaboratively on problems defined with the community

3. Advancing Integrative Learning

Liberal/Professional

new connections between liberal and professional education

Learning Communities

thematically linked courses in different disciplines that students take as a “set” with the expectation that they will examine important human, scientific, or societal questions from multiple points of view

Advanced Interdisciplinary

General Education

courses that invite comparison and connection

Portfolios and E-Portfolios

documenting, integrating, and assessing students’ intellectual progress over time

study of the classics, and the explicit teaching of moral philosophy. By the twentieth century, many of us began to assume that study of the liberal arts and sciences was in itself the essential key to knowledgeable citizenship.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century—and continuing with increasing vigor today—higher education began dramatically enlarging and enriching its role in the education of citizens. Everywhere we see a renewed interest in the connections between the liberal arts and society, with the result that many college and university campuses are beginning to present a very different model of engaged citizenship to today's students. We have put Big Questions from our society directly into the college curriculum, and often into the first-year curriculum, so that students may find that their first-year experiences explore cross-cultural perspectives on individuals and society, or race and ethnicity in comparative perspective, or the formation of social ideals. Through far-reaching changes in general education requirements, and in the requirements of many majors as well, we have signaled our conviction that students need to study other cultures as well as the diversity of our own society.

Service learning is growing in popularity

and so are other forms of field-based learning, including collaborative research done in partnership with community organizations. And many departments, preprofessional fields and liberal arts alike, now encourage students to include field-based learning and/or community-based research as integral elements in the undergraduate experience.

The great majority of these innovations were created to find better and more powerful ways of teaching the nation's recently included students. But as Table I reveals, in responding both to these students and to the needs of a changing world, we also have significantly reinvigorated the way we approach two of the most venerable and fundamental traditions of liberal education.

The third and final group of innovations highlights what I believe is emerging as a new dimension to our contemporary understanding of liberal education: a strong focus on topics, curricula, and practices that teach students how to integrate their learning from different courses, different disciplines, and different kinds of experiences. A focus on integrative learning was perhaps less necessary in the nineteenth century, when the entire curriculum was a unified and progressive course



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**Integrative learning—
focused around
big problems and
new connections
between the academy
and society—is becoming a
new liberal art**

of study with culminating requirements for every student. But both in the contemporary academy and in the wider world, integrative learning—focused around big problems and new connections between the academy and society—is becoming a new liberal art.

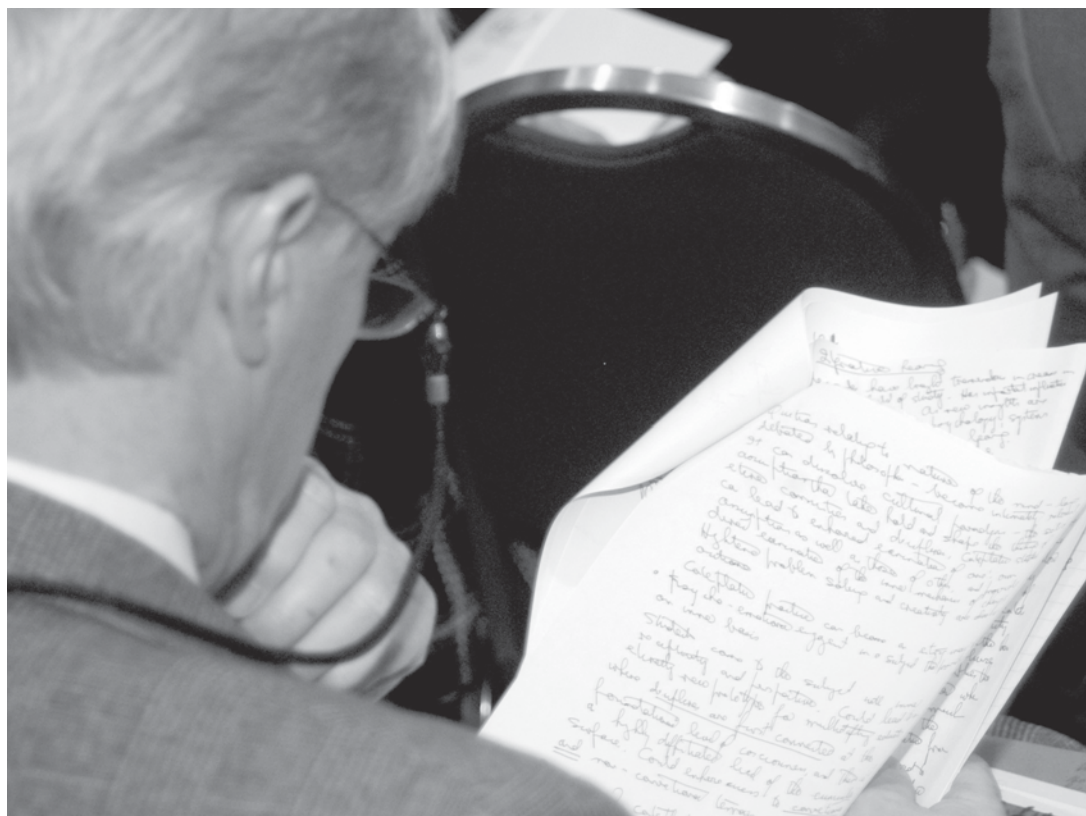
Collectively, these three areas of innovation are beginning to change fundamentally the practices basic to liberal education. They also are reshaping the fundamental ethos and orientation of liberal education. In the past, liberal education was seen as the choice of elites—the very fortunate or the very talented. But today, through your efforts, we are redefining it as the best resource for our democracy, for our economy, and for all our students—especially those who have only recently been included.

I want to elaborate on this point by emphasizing the contrast with earlier conceptions of liberal education. In the past, following John Henry Cardinal Newman, proponents of liberal education have almost routinely described it as, by definition, nonutilitarian and

nonvocational. You all know that gestalt; but perhaps even more importantly, the public and our students know it too. Think about Robert Maynard Hutchins, one of the most passionate and widely influential proponents of the liberal arts. He was insistent that the liberal arts had to be studied for their own sake, and not for

any practical purpose. Hutchins and many who shared his views very successfully persuaded the public that the liberal arts were profoundly antagonistic to the practical, entrepreneurial spirit that characterizes our society—and the great majority of our students.

These arguments have shaped twentieth-century definitions of the liberal arts, but the public has certainly not found them persuasive. The public—and especially the policy makers now so influential in higher education—tend to assume that if liberal education is defined in opposition to the world of action, then liberal education is a luxury they cannot afford. What the New Academy offers in response to this critique is a different conception of liberal education, an ethic that



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Liberal Education

Toward Inclusion, and Excellence

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1959
AAC's quarterly, *The Bulletin*,
(launched in 1915) acquires its
present title, *Liberal Education*.




1969
AAC releases a statement, "Racial Problems
and Academic Program," that asserts,
"The nation owes a debt of gratitude to its
minorities for giving a fresh and morally
compelling impetus to the movement for
reforming relevance to academic program,
not in any trivial or opportunistic sense but
in the sense that the worth of an educational
system is ultimately measured by the
quality of the society it serves."



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extreme.



Celebrating 90 of Leadership for Liberal Education

Taking the Lead for Educational Change



1985
AAC publishes *Integrity in the College Curriculum*. The *New York Times* features it in a front-page article titled "Three-Year Survey Finds College Curriculums in U.S. in Disarray."

1990
Paula Brownlee, president of Hollins College, is appointed as AAC's first woman president. Brownlee is also the first woman to head a major higher education association.

Our nation's campuses have become a highly visible stage on which the most fundamental questions of equality, and community are being enacted.... As higher education fosters campus human experiences, pain, and aspirations behind the language of "difference," we must find ways that can guide this society's commitment to social justice.
(The Drama of Diversity and Democracy: Higher Education, 1990)



Liberal education for the new century... prepares students for active participation in the private and public sectors, in a diverse democracy, and in an even more diverse global community. It has the strongest impact when studies reach beyond the classroom to the larger community, asking students to apply their developing analytical skills and ethical judgment to concrete problems in the world around them.
(Senior Expectations: A New Vision for Learning in a Nation Goes to College—2002)



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2005
AAC launches *Liberal Education and*

deliberately weaves together understanding and practice, analysis and application. The ethos of this New Academy vision of liberal education, in short, is one of engagement.

At the broadest level, we have moved away from an ivory tower conception of the academy and of the liberal arts, and we have begun to invent a form of liberal education in which the world's most significant challenges—contemporary as well as enduring—become a significant catalyst for new scholarship, new curricula, new sites for learning, and new applications of knowledge. So-conceived, liberal education is a necessity, not a luxury. It be-

comes a form of learning that is intentionally designed to make a far-reaching difference in the world.

And from where I sit, it seems that the major driver in much, if not all, of your creativity has been all those recently included students who—we recognize—needed more intentional forms of teaching and more connected and public-spirited forms of learning if they were going to reap the full benefits of college. The New Academy we are inventing together, in short, is a responsive academy, one that still keeps in mind its core values for learning but that also recognizes it needs new practices in order to keep faith both with its ideals and with its students.

This New Academy vision is comprehensive, and that is another of its potential strengths. As Table I demonstrates, the new innovations for liberal education begin in the first year of college and culminate in the final year. At least potentially, they have the power to frame the entire undergraduate experience, not according to the old model of depth and breadth, but with a new focus on intellectual practice, engagement, and integration, across the entire curriculum.

The liberal arts and sciences remain essential to this emergent vision for liberal education; there is no hope of preparing students for a complex world without them. But the New Academy design for liberal education holds that study in arts and sciences disciplines is necessary but not sufficient (see sidebar). The additional requirements for liberal education are (1) that students develop strong intellectual and practical skills, which they must use in any field and any context; (2) that they develop a strong sense of individual and social responsibility, which they will demonstrate through the way they use their knowledge—whether as citizens, as thoughtful people, or in the workplace; and (3) that they demonstrate the ability to gather, integrate, and appropriately apply their learning from many different sources and from many different fields of inquiry.

Defined in this way, as both core knowledge and a set of capacities and responsibilities, liberal education can and should be cultivated in the professional fields just as much as in the arts and sciences fields. These capacities take different forms, but they matter in every field, whether we're talking about English, economics, engineering, or education.

LIBERAL EDUCATION & AMERICA'S PROMISE **Preparing Students for an Era of Greater Expectations**

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Collaborative Leadership and Educational Programs That Foster Liberal Education Outcomes in All Students, Including...

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Natural and Physical World

*social sciences, sciences and mathematics,
humanities, histories, and the arts*

Intellectual and Practical Skills

written and oral communication

inquiry, critical and creative thinking

quantitative literacy

information literacy

teamwork and problem solving

Individual and Social Responsibilities

*civic knowledge and engagement—
local and global*

*intercultural knowledge and
competence*

ethical reasoning and action

*foundation and skills for lifelong
learning*

Integrative Learning

*the capacity to adapt knowledge,
skills, and responsibilities to new
settings and questions*

The LEAP campaign

If this is a promising picture for liberal education, it is also an unfinished picture. So, in sum, what I see when I look across the academy are five realities. First, we have invented a new ethos or a new ethic for liberal education, which we can characterize as an alliance between the traditional liberal arts and purposeful engagement in the world. Second, we have invented a host of new programs, curricula, and ways of learning that, collectively, can help students develop empowering intellectual skills, acquire a strong ethical compass, contribute to their communities, and develop the practical know-how to translate their learning to new contexts and to rally to the challenges of new problems. Third, the research on many of these new practices confirms their effectiveness and underlines their particular



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value for students who, historically, have been underserved by the academy. However, fourth, the more powerful forms of learning remain available to only a fraction of today's students. Many college students are still sitting in large lecture classes and getting, at best, a fragmented college education.

Moreover, the final reality is that we have done almost nothing to help either our publics or our students understand the New Academy vision for liberal education. This year, AAC&U has been interviewing college-bound students.

And we are finding that, while their support for higher education is very strong, their actual understanding of liberal education is virtually nonexistent. Similarly, studies show that while business leaders place a high value on the outcomes described in the sidebar, only 6 percent



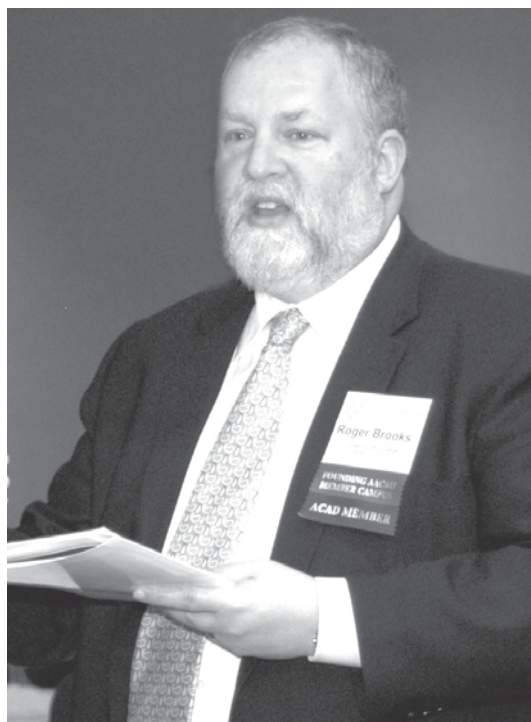
of them think their employees should have a liberal arts education.

As a community, we have been enormously creative in developing new approaches to liberal education that are keenly attuned to the needs of today's students. Those same new approaches also are well-attuned to the demands of a knowledge-intensive economy and to the complexities of our global and domestic challenges. But almost no one outside the academy knows what we are doing or why it matters.

If this New Academy we're creating together is going to move from the margins to the center, if liberal education and the practices that achieve it are going to serve most of our students instead of only some, then we are going to have to enlist the public as an ally in this effort. And we must do a much better job of letting our students in on the vision as well.

And so, on the occasion of its ninetieth anniversary, AAC&U has launched Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), a new

initiative that will shape the work of this association for the decade to come. Through LEAP, AAC&U will champion the value of a liberal education—for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. This campaign will shine a spotlight on what really matters in college, on the kinds of learning that truly empower today's students to succeed and make a difference in the twenty-first century. Through the campus action component of LEAP, AAC&U will work with colleges and universities as they develop, improve, publicize, and institutionalize innovations that



demonstrably help students achieve key liberal education outcomes.

Organized in concert with policy and business leaders, the media, colleges and universities, and prospective and current college students and their parents, the LEAP campaign will

- spark public debate about the kinds of knowledge, skills, and values needed to prepare today's students—from school through college—for an era of greater expectations in every sphere of life (see sidebar on page 15);
- challenge and change the widespread belief that students must choose either a practical education or a liberal education, by building widespread support for educational changes that already are producing a new synthesis of liberal and practical education;

- make visible the inherent inequities in current practices that steer low-income students to college programs that teach narrow job skills while more advantaged students reap the full benefits of a first-rate liberal education;
- document national and state progress in providing every student with access to a high-quality education;
- work in selected states to create and implement action plans—organized in partnership with both employers and public schools—to help college and college-bound students understand, prepare for, and achieve a challenging, public-spirited, and practical liberal education.

AAC&U undertakes many funded projects, and it would be easy to see LEAP simply as one more major project. But the right way to understand LEAP is that we are building new capacity to make liberal education a vital force in our society. We have long described ourselves as a voice and a force for liberal education within the academy. We now want to significantly raise that voice and intensify that force.

In 1976, when we took a dramatic new course for the association, we didn't entirely know what it all would mean, and we could not have anticipated the new learning—on topics ranging from writing to race—that would ultimately light the way. This new direction for AAC&U similarly commits us to a path whose ultimate contours we cannot fully see. But, as a community, we deeply believe that liberal education is the key to America's promise—for all our students and our communities. And the learning we will do together will ultimately be guided, as the path we took thirty years ago was guided, by our determination to fulfill that promise for all our college students. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

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